



FACES OF HOMELESSNESS

Written Testimony of Nate Fox, Program Coordinator & Homeless Ally
Before the Public Health Committee
March 15, 2013

In Support of SB 896, AAC A Homeless Persons' Bill of Rights

Senator Gerratana, Representative Johnson and members of the Public Health Committee, thank you for taking the time to hear my testimony on behalf of the Connecticut Homeless Human Rights Campaign and thank you for supporting the principle that all people, whether housed or unhoused, deserve equal treatment, dignity and respect under the law.

My name is Nate Fox and I'm Project Supervisor for the Faces of Homelessness Speakers' Bureau and co-coordinator of the CT Homeless Human Rights Campaign. Through these projects, I work with people facing homelessness to dismantle the myths and stereotypes of homelessness by educating the public on the realities of what it means to be homeless. As a man of relative privilege, I'm fortunate to say that I've never had to face the pain of experiencing homelessness nor the systematic discrimination that comes with it, but as a homeless ally I have spent a considerable amount of time over the past 3+ years working in shelters and with the homeless community, helping to found Beat of the Street – a street newspaper – and other social justice projects. During this time I have heard numerous accounts of the mistreatment and discrimination that people experiencing homelessness face. In fact, it's the most common thing I've heard.

What I am advocating for today is a social turn in how we approach and address homelessness. It's true that supportive and affordable housing are crucial solutions to homelessness, but from my on the streets experience, I would argue that we need to address the social issues involved in homelessness just as much as the technical, policy-based issues. Society looks down upon and criminalizes people experiencing homelessness and living in poverty. And while building supportive housing has resulted in many people exiting from technical homelessness, the fact is that many still feel stigmatized – for you see, they aren't viewed as humans, but instead they are "formerly homeless." It's like a scarlet letter – once you wear it, it's almost impossible to remove.

A Homeless Bill of Rights changes this dynamic by reaffirming the human rights of our homeless brothers and sisters, but it also can go a step further. When Rhode Island became the first state to pass a Homeless Bill of Rights in the nation, they did this by amending their Fair Housing Laws to include "housing status" as a protected social category and added the Homeless Bill of Rights as an additional section to their Fair Housing Laws. By doing this, they were able to include the phrase, "protect people from discrimination based on housing status" throughout the bill language. The group I am working with is extremely grateful for the Public Health Committee raising and supporting a Connecticut Homeless Bill of Rights modeled after the Rhode Island bill, and we hope the Committee can support a substitute bill that includes the legal phrasing "housing status" and "protect people from discrimination based on housing status." We understand this may necessitate that the bill be referred to the Housing Committee, something we are prepared for.

Truly solving the problems of discrimination and mistreatment will only happen when we finally end homelessness in this state and country. I look forward to that day when we will no longer need a Homeless Bill of Rights, but until then we can take a step towards protecting all residents of Connecticut by eliminating the discrimination, bias, and mistreatment facing our homeless neighbors by legally protecting our citizens from discrimination based on their housing status.

Thank you.

**ADDITIONS AND MAJOR POINTS TO THE
RAISED BILL NO. 896
CONNECTICUT HOMELESS BILL OF RIGHTS**

(1) At the present time, many Connecticut residents continue to face the specter of homelessness due to the severe shortage of affordable housing, the impacts of economic hardship and economic downturn in our state, and a shrinking social safety net.

(2) Article 1, Section 1 of the Connecticut State Constitution states in part, that "All [people] when they form a social compact, are equal in rights."

(3) In line with this essential statement of the common law, it is reaffirmed that no person should have these rights compromised, face unequal treatment, or suffer unnecessarily due to discrimination based on his or her housing status. This chapter intends to address and prevent the continuation of these negative impacts to Connecticut residents who lack a permanent home.

Each homeless person in this state has the right to:

- 1. Move freely and use public spaces, including public sidewalks, in public parks, on public transportation and in public buildings without harassment or intimidation from law enforcement officers, or others in the same manner as other persons.**
- 2. Equal opportunities for employment, and has the right not to face discrimination while seeking or maintaining employment due to his or her lack of permanent being that of a shelter or a social service provider.**
- 3. Receive emergency medical care, free from discrimination based on his or her housing status.**
- 4. Register to vote and receive necessary documentation to prove identity for voting without discrimination due to his or her housing status. The Secretary of State shall provide voter registration identification cards, free of charge.**
- 5. Protection from disclosure of his or her records and information provided to homeless shelters and service providers to state, municipal, and private entities without appropriate legal authority and the right to confidentiality of personal records and information in accordance with all limitations on disclosure established by the Federal Homeless Management Information System, Federal Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act, and the Federal Violence Against Women Act.**
- 6. Reasonable expectation of privacy with his or her personal property; to the same extent as personal property in a permanent residence.**
- 7. Receive equal treatment by state and municipal agencies without discrimination based on housing status.**